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ABSTRACT

This pamphlet is designed to help parents develop and maintain a consistently firm style when dealing with their children's behavior. It explains the importance of setting limits of acceptable behavior for children. A "firmness continuum" is described with a "wishy-washy," uncertain parenting style at one extreme, a harsh, stern style at the other extreme, and the desired level of firmness somewhere in between. Examples of parental responses falling at the extremes and in the middle of this continuum are given to explain the role that tone of voice, certain words or language patterns, and body language have in communicating a firm attitude. Distinctions are drawn between situations requiring limit setting, in which firmness is essential, and situations in which parents may express preferences or choices but need not hold a firm line. Finally, the importance of consistent follow through on established limits is stressed. (VW)

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Project Enlightenment, located in Raleigh, North Carolina, is a comprehensive mental health/educational program serving young children (birth to age six), their parents, teachers, and other child care givers. Administered through the Wake County Public School System and affiliated with Area Mental Health for Wake County, the Project has received local, state, and national recognition for its innovative approaches to prevention and early intervention, its effective service delivery system, and its positive influence in the community. Selected as a state model for early intervention, Project Enlightenment has also been selected as one of seven national models of preschool mental health programs by the Joint Information Service of the National Association for Mental Health.

Major services of Project Enlightenment include consultation to day care and preschool teachers, parent education, family counseling, teacher training, a demonstration preschool, community consultation and education, services to high risk infants, a TALKline telephone consultation service, and a Parent-Teacher Resource Center. In existence since 1969, the Project includes a multi-disciplinary staff of early childhood educators, parent education workers, and psychologists. Interested persons are invited to visit or write for additional information.

FIRMNESS:
A Way to Help Young Children Learn to Behave

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What is firmness?

Firmness is that special quality that lets children know that *you say what you mean and mean what you say.* Firmness communicates that you mean business and that you will follow through. Firmness flows naturally when a parent decides what to do about a particular behavior and is committed and certain about seeing it through. Firmness is essential when setting limits on behavior with young children. It is the foundation upon which all other discipline rests.

The dictionary defines firmness as "not weak or uncertain; set, definite; steady." FIRMNESS is a style or quality of relating that communicates certainty and is expressed primarily through tone of voice and also through body language such as posture, facial expresion, eye contact, and the position of the hands and arms.

FIRMNESS is NOT yelling, scolding, scowling, begging, pleading, demanding and ordering. It is not only possible, but essential, to be firm in a kind, respectful, friendly and gentle way.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO BE FIRM?

Children (especially young children) need definite limits; that is, guidelines and clear statements of acceptable behavior. When limits are stated firmly, children understand what is expected of them; they feel secure. They are more likely to cooperate and to develop self-control. Parents often report their amazement at how clear and firm statements of expectations can also help minimize power struggles and a child's testing to see "just how far he/she can go."

TONE OF VOICE

Many people think that being firm means being stern and harsh. Other people may attempt to be firm, but are not perceived as being firm because their voices sound uncertain. A firm voice should avoid the extremes of either sounding uncertain or unnecessarily harsh. A truly firm tone should communicate the message, "I mean what I am saying, I am definite about it, I expect you to follow through, and I am confident that you will do so." Frequently a few simple words said in the right tone can communicate this rather complex message.

THE FIRMNESS CONTINUUM:

WISHY-WASHY, UNCERTAIN ⟷ FIRM ⟷ HARSH, STERN

An uncertain tone of voice has these qualities: it can be questioning, pleading, wavery, ambivalent or too permissive. This tone can inadvertently communicate, "It doesn't really matter whether you do this or not, I don't think you will do this, and I really don't expect you to follow through." People using this weak style often use a high-pitched or too soft tone and may end their requests with a question or words like, "OK?," or "Is that alright?," or "Won't you please?" Often, parents use this wishy-washy style when they are confronted with a new behavior or a new situation and are uncertain about how to handle it. In such circumstances, it may be helpful for parents to stall for a few minutes and give themselves time to figure out how to handle a situation. When clear expectations are established, a firmer approach is easier to use.

At the other end of the continuum is a tone that is too stern or harsh. There are two dangers in communicating with children in a stern or harsh manner. The first danger is that children only learn to comply with requests because they feel threatened and afraid. Frequently, a harsh, stern tone goes hand in hand with a loud voice and communicates "I'm going to make you do this because I'm bigger than you are." Even though children may comply with the request, they may resent this attitude; and it creates an atmosphere of parent-controlling-child or parent-against-child rather than parent and child working together. In later years, fearful/resentful children may either rebel against their parents or withdraw from them. The other danger is that a harsh and stern parental tone can create rebellious responses in children at an early age. Children can easily react to the bossy *tone* rather than the request by becoming angry and refusing to cooperate. Such a reaction gives parents little recourse but to respond more harshly, to use force or to retreat. When children respond to requests with rudeness, outright refusals, temper tantrums or attempts to hit a parent, it may be that the request was made in too harsh a tone.

HOW CAN ONE COMMUNICATE FIRMNESS?

Too often, parents move from one end of the continuum to the other without ever being firm. They start off with a wishy-washy request and repeat that request several times. When the child does not mind, the parent becomes angry and frustrated and then makes the request using a harsh, stern tone. This is often mistaken for being firm but clearly is not.

The quality of a firm voice is at neither extreme of the continuum. It is a steady, even tone that is consistently delivered. It is not ambivalent, weak or uncertain nor is it harsh, angry, loud demanding or authoritarian. With practice, one can have a tone of voice somewhere in the middle . . . what we call firm. A tone of this type communicates, "I mean what I am saying, and I'm certain about it." But the art comes in communicating this message in a calm and friendly manner without raising your voice. While most of us raise our voice in order to achieve compliance, research shows that children respond more readily to lower, calmer tones. Children respond best to an attitude of, "We'll get through this together. I'm on your side. I'll help you learn to control yourself."

THE FIRMNESS CONTINUUM: TONE OF VOICE AND ITS EFFECTS

WISHY-WASHY, UNCERTAIN ←→ FIRM ←→ HARSH, STERN

Parents tone of voice:	soft, weak, uncertain, questioning tone.	moderate, calm, friendly, definite tone.	loud, angry, bossy tone.
Parents underlying message:	"I don't really expect you to do this."	"I know you are going to do this."	"I'm gonna make you do this or else!"
Child's reaction:	Child ignores parent, waits or stalls.	Child cooperates.	Child gets angry, rebels and refuses, or child complies out of fear.

Using a firm, calm and friendly voice as we have described here is a very difficult thing for most parents to achieve. Even with a lot of practice, no parent can remain friendly, calm and firm all the time, nor should he/she try to! However, working to develop this special tone of voice will help to make children want to listen; and it increases their desire to cooperate. Most parents are amazed at how much easier their job as parents becomes after they make an effort to develop a firm tone of voice.

THE FIRMNESS CONTINUUM: EXAMPLES OF WORDS AND TONE OF VOICE

WISHY-WASHY, UNCERTAIN ⟷ FIRM ⟷ HARSH, STERN

"Do you think you could be a little more quiet?" (quivering voice)	"You need to lower your voice." (normal voice, respectfully)	"Stop that screaming immediately!" (harshly and in loud voice)
"I think it's a good idea to clean up your room, don't you?" (questioning)	"It's time to clean up your room." (calm, matter-of-fact)	"Get your room straight right now!" (demanding loud voice)
"You've really got to try harder to leave your brother alone, O.K.?" (pleading tone)	"Keep your hands to yourself; please put them in your own lap." (low tone)	"Get your hands off your brother, I said!" (sternly)
"We really wish you wouldn't play with your food." (wavering)	"You will need to eat your dinner or leave the table." (calm, certain)	"Stop playing in your food!" (commanding)

BODY LANGUAGE

When you set limits with children, they listen to your tone of voice and they also watch your body language to translate your message. Our body language includes our facial expressions, posture and the way we hold our hands and arms. For instance, a tone of voice can be firm and calm but an angry facial expression, a big smile at the wrong time or a finger pointed at a child can change the message and work against the friendly, firm voice. Since firmness involves asking for a child's cooperation in a non-forceful way, it is important to avoid physically holding, dragging or pushing a child. Here are some tips on how to use body language to have it work most effectively in making contact with the child:

1. Go to where the child is. Talking from another room or too great a distance makes the request seem less important.
2. Get on the child's eye level - kneel or sit down together so that you are at equal height with the child.
3. Look at the child's face and gain eye contact, if the child allows this. (Many children do not look at the parent, but are close by and listening which is just as significant.)
4. Keep the child's attention with statements such as, "I have something important to tell you," or "I need you to listen carefully."
5. Use a *light* touch to accentuate your message, if needed. For instance, if a child seems to be having difficulty paying attention, a light touch on the child's shoulder, back or knee may help him/her listen.
6. Notice how you hold your hands, arms and posture of your body. See if they are communicating friendliness as well as, "This is important and I mean business."

THE FIRMNESS CONTINUUM: BODY LANGUAGE

	WISHY-WASHY, UNCERTAIN ◄►	FIRM	◄► HARSH, STERN
Facial Expression:	nervous smile, looking away from child.	neutral, calm expression, looking at child.	tight expression, looking at child with scowl or frown.

BODY LANGUAGE (Continued)

WISHY-WASHY, UNCERTAIN ◄——► FIRM ◄——► HARSH, STERN

Body Posture:	facing away or walking away from child.	standing close to child, bending or kneeling to child's eye level.	looking down over child, grabbing or holding child tightly.
Hand Position:	wringing hands.	hands at side or relaxed.	shaking a finger or hands on hips.
Touch:	tentative touch	light touch if needed.	grabbing, holding tightly.

WHEN SHOULD YOU BE FIRM?

It is important to be firm before you react out of anger or frustration. Most children have a particular behavior such as whining or talking back that, if repeated, has the potential for getting their parents to lose control. Identify which behaviors can cause you to lose your temper, get frustrated or get upset.

Using your firm tone with these behaviors from the beginning will help you avoid going beyond your tolerance level. A firm approach from the start with irritating behaviors will also help you avoid alternating between a weak, uncertain request, and a harsh, stern reaction.

Firmness is not a way to communicate with your child all the time. If an issue concerning your child is important enough that a limit is set or a rule is made, it is important to be firm in your approach. Sometimes parents are firm about things that are really preferences or choices but not limits that they really require. It is best to distinguish these issues as preferences or choices so that your lack of follow through will not dilute your authority.

EXAMPLES:

FIRM LIMIT — WHERE FOLLOW THROUGH IS NEEDED:

"It is time to put on your seatbelt and then we can start the car." (Only start the car when belt is buckled.)

"Stay in our yard while you are outside." (Bring child inside if child leaves the yard.)

PREFERENCES — WHERE NO FOLLOW THROUGH IS NEEDED:

"I would prefer that you drink milk with supper, but if you want, you could drink water instead." (If the child chooses water, you need to accept that choice.)

"You can wear the green shirt or the blue shirt, you decide." (Then you need to accept whatever the child decides.)

MAKING A FIRM APPROACH WORK BY FOLLOWING THROUGH

A very important part of making a firm approach work with children is a commitment to seeing the requested behavior through to its implementation. For example, if you say to your child, "You need to eat the apple in the kitchen," and your child continues to eat the apple in the living room, you will need to get your child to the kitchen or remove the apple.

At this point there are many avenues a parent can take to implement the stated limit. For instance, in a firm voice the parent can go to the child and say something like, "Food is eaten in the kitchen." Or, a choice could be given such as, "Can you go to the kitchen by yourself or do I need to help you get there?" Or, distraction could be used, "Bring your apple into the kitchen and see the birds at the birdfeeder." The point is that the parent means business about the stated limit and needs to find a way to see that it is implemented.

When a child sees a parent follow through with a stated limit over and over again, the child learns to trust that parents mean what they say. In light of this, it is important to pay attention to what your actions teach your child.

Children will observe you to see if your firm approach is followed by firm actions. For instance, when you give a warning in a firm tone and then follow through, your child learns that you mean business the first time. If you give five warnings before following through, you are teaching your

child that you really mean it the fifth time, and your child will probably wait for several warnings before complying.

As in the above example, delayed or erratic follow through dilutes the effects of a firm approach. A firm approach can be a powerful tool in dealing with children as long as it is coupled with consistent followthrough. However, a firm approach will not succeed without firm followthrough.

CONCLUSION

For many parents, firmness does not come naturally and needs to be learned. Often our own parenting style leans towards one end of the continuum or the other, and we need practice in learning how to be consistently firm. Most parents find that when they are stressed and children are misbehaving, it is too easy to fall back into old patterns.

To achieve a firm style, deliberate practice may be necessary. The more you practice being firm the easier it gets to stay firm when needed. In practicing you may find it helpful to listen to your tone of voice on tape. In addition you can have your spouse or another parent observe you. Getting feedback from others you trust can help you gain more awareness of what you are communicating through your tone of voice and body language and whether you are using follow-through effectively.

While learning firmness can be difficult, persistence in developing a firm style can have many long lasting benefits. For you, these might mean less nagging, scolding or loss of temper which will lead to a more pleasant, cooperative relationship with your child; and a feeling of more effectiveness as a parent. For children, benefits can include: better self-control and the ability to successfully deal with other adults in the world which will promote self esteem.

This booklet is one of a continuing series of booklets of interest to parents and teachers of young children. Please write Project Enlightenment for a list of topics in this series or for information about other Project publications.

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